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ABSTRACT

State departments of education, administrators, educational testing systems, and the media are demanding uniformity of instructional units and of performance objectives for community college English courses. Limited funds and the desire to promote a favorable public image are factors encouraging standardization of instruction. Presently, policy and curriculum decisions are being made by those outside the educational system. More effective decision making can stem from the teachers themselves, in response to students' educational needs and interests. In order to regain rightful control of the curriculum, instructors must become active in the public relations and political issues of community college decision making. (KS)

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A B S T R A C T

CONTROL OF OUR OWN CURRICULUM IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Sylvia A. Holladay

Today various groups of people--taxpayers, legislators, social theorists, administrators--are attempting to control education in the English classroom. Perhaps we as educators, especially as teachers, have lost their respect. As community college teachers we find ourselves in a particularly vulnerable position. We must regain the confidence of our challengers and the faith of our colleagues and then do well the job we and only we are qualified--through study and experience--to do: structure and implement English curricula in the two-year college. We timid must become aggressive. We disillusioned must have faith in our potential. We apolitical humanists must now become two-year college curriculum activists.

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CONTROL OF OUR OWN CURRICULUM IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

By

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(A paper presented as part of a panel--The Humanist, the Administrative Ladder and the Community College--at the Conference of College Composition and Communication, March 25, 1976.)

I seldom read the newspaper before I go to school, but recently as I was sipping my morning coffee, I was jolted awake by a headline--"Bill Seeks Uniform Grading Policies." I sat down and read the following:

> Rep. Vince Fechtel, R-Leesburg, said Monday he is filing a bill requiring state universities to implement uniform course grading policies.
> Fechtel said his bill would also require the state universities to formulate uniform policies for withdrawing from classes and repeating courses.
> He charged that liberal grading and withdrawal policies waste tax dollars by allowing poor students to repeat courses until they get acceptable grades and preventing good students from gaining entry to classes. . . .
> He said limits on the number of times a student could take a course would assure that education dollars "go for those who are more diligent and deserving, but still give everybody an opportunity to acquire a college education."
> Fechtel said his bill would apply to community colleges.[1]

Fechtel's proposal is only a bill that has been filed. However, the Florida State Department of Education has mandated a Uniform Course Designation and Numbering System for all institutions of higher education in Florida, four-year and two-year, public and private, to be operational by fall of 1976. The purpose of this system, according to the Senate Education Committee Chair Phil Lewis, Democrat-West Palm Beach, is to save the state "millions of dollars" by pointing out "unneeded or overlapping courses" in higher education. Dr. Mike DeCarlo, project director, proudly stated that academicians nationwide are carefully watching Florida's project because no other state system of higher education has such a system.[2]

What else is happening in community college education?

Many academic deans and some state departments of education are mandating goals and performance objectives for all community college courses.

The deans and state departments are demanding uniformity of instructional units and performance objectives for courses of all instructors on all campuses.

Administrators are reorganizing the departments into divisions and in the process forcing the instructor farther from the curriculum decision level and in some cases eliminating developmental or remedial courses. The reason for these changes is to save money.

At one community college the parents and the public objected to the students reading Catcher in the Rye by J. D. Salinger, so the faculty dropped that novel from the reading list for freshman English. At another two-year college the parents and public objected to Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five. Again the result was censorship. In both cases the faculty censored literature out of fear.

Some of our colleagues denounce current linguistic research, especially studies in dialect and the concept of the students' right to their own language just as they rejected McLuhan's observations in the Sixties. They say, "That foolishness will go away soon," revealing both their lack of understanding and their fear of change, a threat to their "security."

Many educational systems are now instituting proficiency examinations in reading and writing. One of the best known is the sophomore writing exam in Georgia, a 500-word, introduction-body-conclusion theme mandated by the University of Georgia for all community college students.

At one Arizona junior college the President has set up a rigid form of censorship of exhibits and productions for that school.

Educational Testing Service (ETS) and the College Boards (CEEB) exercise much power over community college education today: their standardized tests often determine who can enter college. And CLEP (College Level Exemption Program) determines who will receive college credit for knowledge already possessed.

Publishers of English textbooks, through their editorial policies and interests, determine what many instructors will teach and what others will emphasize. They do so often without sufficient input from community college teachers themselves.

The media is making more and more demands upon community college education. Remember the article on bonehead English in Time in the spring of 1975? Remember the December 1975 Newsweek article demanding a return to the "basics"? Remember the television commentaries of Eric Severeid and Paul Harvey, decrying the present state of education? Think of all the newspaper exposés of your local educational situation.

I could continue listing the efforts of various groups to control English education in the community college. I could continue to cite their power and influence upon what each of us does in the classroom. Each of you could quickly recall a dozen other examples of these forces. Possibly you respond favorably to some--or even most--of these trends. I don't.

I am concerned about all these pressures upon education today. And, just as many problems are intensified in two-year schools, so is this outside influence. Today individuals outside the classroom want to control education in our classrooms, to tell us what to teach, what to include in our curriculum. And the effects are evident. Note the movement toward uniformity in curriculum implied in the examples I cited earlier as just one result.

Why is this happening? What has caused these demands? Several factors are involved. Definitely among the causes are the increasingly limited funds for higher education today along with the understandable greater demand for accountability from taxpayers and legislators as well as the fluctuating numbers of students attending community colleges. Other causes are our public image--the stereotypes of English teachers, of English teaching, of two-year colleges--and the widespread misunderstanding of what we are doing and trying to do.

Again we need to ask why. Why is there so much misunderstanding of what goes on in a freshman or sophomore English classroom in the community college? Why do so few people realize

the value of what happens here? Why do outsiders think they can or should tell us how to do the job which we have prepared for? The real reasons are within us, those of us who teach English in community colleges. Some of us English teachers, us humanists in community colleges, have minimized the importance of our role in higher education. Some of us have lost faith in ourselves; some have lost faith in the humanities. Some of us have stopped teaching humanistic skills and perceptions--clarity, economy, persuasion, processes of problem solving, methods of judgment, the importance of self-knowledge, the discovery of self through writing and reading, comprehension of one's culture, ways to cope with modern society. Many of us have isolated ourselves; such is our nature, that which made us become humanistic teachers of English. We prefer to study Pope's "Letter to Mr. Arbuthnot" or James Joyce's Ulysses instead of wrestling with ways to deal with the Fechtels of our legislatures. We like to teach, not to argue, not to administrate, not to protest. Yet we seldom agree among ourselves. All of us know of the archetypal essay that was circulated within an English department for evaluation and received every grade from A to F. And we choose textbooks with many selections so that each instructor may have some of his "favorites" to teach. Even when we do agree, we don't act. To act takes time and energy. We say, "Just let me teach. Let me go in my classroom and close the door."

Can we continue to close the world out of our classrooms? Out of our professional lives? I think not.

Henry Maloney summarizes our situation well:

> There's a great deal of flack going on now in certain sections of the country about some of the allegedly permissive stands that English professional groups are taking, both in regard to use of language, choice of books, use of movies, use of language, use of grafitti, if you will, which some people perceive as wrong in itself. We created these attitudes. We, the profession collectively, created those attitudes, twenty, thirty, forty years ago. We told people that it had to be this way. We convinced them that what we were dealing with was immutable, and truthful. And now that we've discovered change, and have reconciled ourselves to it, it's very difficult for us to communicate to the people that the English teachers dealt with in the past, who have now become legislators, school board members, parents, to tell them that nouns aren't really that important any more, and gerunds aren't making it today, and shall and will have been

> on the shelf for some time. They are saying to their kids when they come home, "Well, how come you're not learning English?" Their notion of English evolved from--developed from--English teachers' communication to them as to what English is.[3]

So we, humanists, English teachers, no longer control our curriculum in community colleges. Our situation is enough to make us paranoid.

But let's pause for a moment. Who is the us I've been talking about? Whose is the our in "our curriculum"?

Instead of generalizing further, let me characterize myself, one community college English instructor. First, I have taught fourteen years at St. Petersburg Junior College, an open-door school of 12,000 students on three campuses. Second, I have chosen to work in this type of school. I have junior high, high school, and university teaching experience; I prefer teaching in the community college. Third, I support the community college concept/philosophy of education--open-door mass education, an opportunity for everyone to learn, and to succeed, in an academic environment; education that is responsive to the community in which the educational institution is located; education that is not elitist nor isolated. Fourth, I am an English teacher, and I intend to remain a teacher. My primary goal is to help students to understand, use, and enjoy our language and to enrich their lives through their becoming more skillful in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. My perspective is that of one who deals daily with freshmen and sophomores, their problems and successes with English. Finally, I am a humanist. I believe in the importance of the human element in education. I treat students as human beings, not as numbers or dollars and cents. I endorse those studies which stress individuality and promote human culture. Thus, in some ways I am unique; in others I am typical of those of us who work in two-year colleges; in still others I am no different from English teachers in high schools or universities.

Now let us turn our attention to our relationship to the public, to society. All education--humanistic education, that is--must be responsive to society. All of us in education are responsible to the taxpayers, but especially those of us in public educational institutions. All teachers should

respect students and be responsive to their needs and interests. We must learn to listen to them. Do they "know what's best for them"? I don't know, but I do know that input and feedback from students is valuable to a concerned teacher and to a humanist. In other words, we don't teach a vacuum.

The community college situation is special. The community college is caught between the prestigious university and the massive K-12 system. It is the newest type of school. It is the least familiar and the most misunderstood. Some people still claim junior college education is second-rate education, the thirteenth grade with faculties composed of leftovers from those who couldn't get jobs in universities and those who have been "promoted" from high school positions, with students who can't do "college-level" work. Bob Hogan, NCTE Executive Secretary, has called the community college the "purgatory of education." Only recently have we begun to establish our own separate identity in the community college, responding to our students and our community, cooperating with the university and the high school. Only recently have we begun to be understood by others in education and by the public. Only recently have we begun to claim our rightful position in the educational hierarchy and our due respect for what we accomplish. But we need much more change. We have many problems to solve.

Many of our community college curriculum problems today are with the administrative ladder and with the legislature. We now have an adversary relationship with them; this should not be so. We must cooperate with them just as we respond to the public and to our students.

But we, those of us who teach in two-year schools, are the ones who should weigh the evidence and make the decisions about the English curriculum in our schools. How can we do this? We can accept this responsibility as ours. We can be informed, keep up, read. We can do more than complain. We can act. We can become active, on all levels--in our department, our school, our city, county, state, region, in the nation. We can speak out, everywhere, to begin to correct misconceptions and to change our image. Once on a twenty minute plane ride, I was seated between

an engineering foreman and a go-go dancer. After their initial shock of "Oh, you're an English teacher!", they sarcastically asked me about my work. As the plane landed, both told me they had had no idea that they had known so little about what's going on in junior college English and why. By being informed and by speaking out, I had quickly changed their negative attitudes to positive ones.

Ultimately what we must do is re-educate, change attitudes--first of other teachers, then of our administrators, the public, and the legislators. Thus, we will change our image.

Public relations and politics are anathema to many of us; both smack of selling, of hypocrisy, of compromise, even of dishonesty. They are secular and materialistic; they are not of the mind or the spirit. However, in order to regain control of our curriculum, both PR and politics are necessary. We must be realistic. We must sell our product, and we have a good product to sell--ourselves and our humanistic goals for our students and our society. We can't be paranoid. We must be confident we can do the job: our training in logic and language, in psychology and humanistic concerns, our experience in educating varied students qualify us best to make important curriculum decisions--what and how we will teach. We must be enthusiastic. We must now persuade others, those who control or influence us, that we are the best qualified decision-makers for English in the two-year college. We should keep students, administrators, legislators, taxpayers informed, aware, and concerned. Those of us who teach our language must use our language to convince and manipulate others for everyone's benefit. We must be optimistic. With Alvin Toffler, the futurist, we should say, "We can do something. We do have time. It's not too late."

Let's look now at a few examples of what has already been done to help us regain rightful control of our curriculum. In 1972 the Florida Association of Departments of English (FADE) and the Florida Task Force on the Uniform Course Numbering System, with community college leaders among the members of both groups, spoke out against the uniformity in English education which could result from the implementation of this system. Consequently, in 1975 the Florida Legislature

responded to the concerns of our English professionals and other educational leaders banded together and wrote a safeguard into the law to assure that "the system shall not encourage or require course content perscription or standardization or uniform teaching."[4] In 1974 the Conference College Composition and Communication (CCCC) adopted the Students' Right to Their Own Language resolution and published a background statement and bibliography on recent linguistic research.[5] The CCCC Committee on the Language Statement included among its thirteen members four community college linguists--Adam Casmier, Forest Park Community College; Myrna Harrison, Laney Community College; Elizabeth Martin, Odessa College; and Elisabeth McPherson, Forest Park Community College, Past Chair of CCCC. The result of this statement has been increased knowledge of linguistics among us two-year college English instructors and growing demand from us for curriculum changes to reflect contemporary linguistics scholarship. The National Junior College Committee, composed of regional representatives of two-year college English teachers, is investigating how to become an accrediting agency for two-year-college-English-teacher-training programs to insure appropriate education for those of us who choose to teach in community colleges. The Newsletter of NJCC is a publication through which junior college English teachers can speak out. SLATE, the recently formed NCTE committee for Support for Learning and Teaching of English, offers us an opportunity to become more politically informed and active; SLATE will also be attempting to change our image. At St. Petersburg Junior College, the faculty, led by the members of the Communications Division, have prevented a movement toward uniformity of courses through performance objectives and have successfully fought reducing our courses in English and the humanities to measurable skills.

I agree with Frederic Ness, who commented in the Change Symposium on the State of the Humanities, that "The real problem is not devising [a] new curriculum, but creating the new teacher."[6] We must regain the confidence of our challengers and the faith of our colleagues and then do well the job we and only we are qualified--through study and experience--to do: structure

and implement English curricula in the two-year college. We timid must become aggressive. We disillusioned must have faith in our potential. We apolitical humanists must now become two-year curriculum activists.

My comments and my bibliography are intended to change attitudes--to create the "new teacher" of English in the two-year college. Consider, read, share. That will be a move in the humanistic direction.

End Notes

[1]"Bill Seeks Uniform Grading Policies," ST. PETERSBURG TIMES, March 10, 1976, Section B.

[2]Michael Goldman, "State's Course-Numbering System Is First In Nation," ST. PETERSBURG TIMES, August 17, 1975, Section B.

[3]David Sohn, "A Talk With Henry Maloney," ENGLISH JOURNAL, 65 (February 1976), 9.

[4]Goldman.

[5]"Students' Right to Their Own Language," Special Issue of COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION, 25 (Fall 1974). Copies available from NCTE.

[6]"The State of the Humanities: A Symposium," CHANGE, 7(Summer 1975), 51.

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